



LOSING EGYPT

How a Vital U.S. Strategic Partnership Crumbled

By Steven A. Cook

Since the 1950s, three interests have guided the United States in the Middle East: ensuring the free flow of energy resources from the region, helping to protect the security of the state of Israel, and preventing any power—other than the United States—from dominating the Middle East. There have been variations of these three broad policy objectives in six decades. For example, preventing Moscow’s penetration of the region ceased to be a central issue for the United States after the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991. Observers often also include “countering rogue states” and “combating terrorism” in the constellation of U.S. interests. A case can be made for the latter, especially in light of the “cosmic struggle” that *al Qaeda* and its affiliates are waging, but confronting the challenge of terrorism is not specific to the Middle East. To be sure, origins of the conflict are in the Middle East, but the battlefield is truly global. As for the problem of so-called rogue states—countries that threaten the regional rules of the game that the United States and its allies have established—it is merely derivative of Washington’s interest in oil, Israel, and its own regional predominance. In order to achieve these goals, Washington long pursued a policy that could best be characterized as “authoritarian stability.”

In late 1979, a foreign policy intellectual named Jeane Kirkpatrick, who would go on to serve as Ronald Reagan’s ambassador to the United Nations, penned an article in the neoconservative flagship publication *Commentary* called “Dictatorships and Double Standards.” All around Kirkpatrick, there were troubling signs that the global correlation of forces—a Soviet concept encompassing broad measures of a country’s relative influence, power, and prestige—was shifting away from the United States. In January 1979, the pro-American Shah of Iran fled his country as a revolution unfolded, making way for the emergence of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In July of the same year, the Washington-friendly dynasty that controlled Nicaragua collapsed. In place

◀ U.S. President Jimmy Carter and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Cairo, March 8, 1979. *Darryl Heikes/Bettmann/Corbis*

of the Somoza family, which had ruled the country as an American client since the 1930s, the Cuba-allied Sandinista National Liberation Front came to power. Soon afterwards, Nicaragua fell into the Soviet orbit. Kirkpatrick's piece was published at the same time the Iranian hostage crisis began. On November 4, revolutionaries stormed the American Embassy in Tehran, taking fifty American diplomats and Marines hostage for what would become 444 days. Simultaneous to the takeover, Iran experienced a wave of anti-American protests, during which hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, turned out in the country's main cities declaring, *Marg bar Am-ree ka!* (Death to America!). The month after "Dictatorships and Double Standards" appeared, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. Moscow's adventure would end in a debacle a decade later, but at the time it was seen as a worrisome indicator that the Soviets—taking advantage of American weakness—were embarking on an effort to alter the geostrategic balance of Southwest Asia permanently.

For Kirkpatrick and others, President Jimmy Carter's emphasis on human rights was to blame for Washington's global predicament. The stakes, according to Kirkpatrick, were too high in the global struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union for American policymakers to care about the character of regimes so long as their leaders were aligned with the United States. In practice, this meant that human rights, political and personal freedoms, rule of law, and accountability should be of little or no concern to Washington in the conduct of its relations with American allies. Once more, if those rulers should find themselves under threat from anti-American groups, whether Islamist theocrats or Marxist revolutionaries, then Washington had an obligation to support its nondemocratic allies. Regardless of how brutal and repressive their dictatorships were, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and Anastasia Somoza were far better than Iran's revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, and the Sandinistas' Daniel Ortega.

Perhaps spooked by the events of the late 1970s, successive American administrations seemed to take Kirkpatrick's policy recommendation to heart and, in the Middle East especially, pursued a policy that placed an emphasis on the stability that friendly authoritarians could provide. In one of the most stirring speeches of the late Cold War, President Ronald Reagan stood in the shadow of Berlin's Brandenburg Gate and the wall that divided the city and demanded, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" Reagan was imploring his Soviet counterpart to free not just the people of East Berlin but also of East Germany and, indeed, the entire Eastern Bloc. Yet, on the Middle East's clear democracy and freedom deficits, Reagan, who often referred to the United States as a beacon of liberty throughout the world, was mostly silent throughout his presidency.

Foreign policy realism marked George H. W. Bush's turn in the White House, which was consistent with Kirkpatrick's thinking a decade earlier. Bush ordered five hundred thousand troops to the Persian Gulf and the deserts of Saudi Arabia to face down Saddam Hussein, not because of Iraq's version of totalitarianism, but rather because the Iraqi leader

had invaded Kuwait and declared it a province of his own country. Had Washington and the international community acceded to Baghdad's aggression, the invasion would have likely set a precedent that would have complicated the United States' global interests. In justifying the dispatch of American troops to the Persian Gulf, President Bush declared that one of his administration's objectives was the emergence of a "new world order." Yet Bush was interested more in maintaining a peaceful international order—a lofty goal indeed—than in the nature of the states that encompassed the international community.

Bush's successor, Bill Clinton, indicated early on in his tenure that he wanted to move out of the "authoritarian stability" paradigm in favor of a foreign policy that, among other things, placed an emphasis on the "enlargement of democracy" around the world. Yet, in the Middle East, it was business as usual. Clinton was inaugurated at around the same time *al Gama'a al Islamiyya's* campaign of terrorism in Egypt was in full swing and, according to an administration official at the time, "We felt the need to stand shoulder to shoulder with Mubarak against the extremists." The same official also revealed that the administration had a policy of promoting democracy in the Middle East, but it ran through the peace process. Clinton's team reasoned that once there was a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the justification for national security states—foremost Egypt—would evaporate, paving the way for more open and accountable governments.

By any objective measure, the policy of "authoritarian stability" worked for thirty years. The flow of oil from the region was only disrupted once, during the 1973 Saudi-led oil embargo, but this was temporary, lasting only six months, though it did cause considerable economic pain to the United States. Israel has remained secure and, since its peace treaty with Egypt in 1979, has not confronted the prospect of fighting an all-out war with its neighbors. And ever since the mid-1970s, when Henry Kissinger flipped Egypt, Washington has been the region's predominant power. There have been setbacks, of course. Besides the oil embargo, the Iranian Revolution was a blow to the United States. In one fell swoop, Iran went from strategic ally to hostile power, making it relatively more complicated and expensive for Washington to pursue its objectives. Still, with the help of countries like Egypt, the United States has managed to achieve its primary regional interests.

It has become cliché to suggest that "on September 11 everything changed." In hindsight, the phrase seems maudlin, but in many ways it is correct. The happy globalization of the late 1990s gave way to a darker, more forbidding view of the world and the threats it posed to the United States. On July 10, 2001, a former senior counterterrorism official at the State Department, Larry C. Johnson, published an op-ed in the *New York Times* called "The Declining Threat of Terrorism" in which he argued that the danger to Americans from terrorism had receded to such an extent that it was largely negligible. Just

two months later, the *Times* ran a slew of editorials and op-eds called “The War Against America; An Unfathomable Attack,” “War without Illusions,” “How to Protect the Homeland,” “The Specter of Biological Terror,” and “Safe Borders.” The vast difference in worldview between Johnson’s piece and the subsequent publications in the newspaper of record in just sixty or so days was profound. More than anything, it reflected a sudden and dramatic shift in the national mood.

‘Drain the Swamp’

In the search for answers about what happened on 9/11, some Americans sought to withdraw from the dangerous world; others regarded the attacks as a call to action to defend America’s way of life. Still others took a critical look at U.S. foreign policy, especially in the Middle East and Washington’s support for Israel, and concluded that the United States itself was to blame for the tragedy. In those heated days after the attacks, when there was a pervasive fear of another hit at any time and any place, this type of debate was most unwelcome in American political discourse. At the same time, a small group of American officials were reevaluating U.S.-Middle East policy, though they were not questioning ties with Israel. While fires were still burning in lower Manhattan and the Pentagon, officials quietly jettisoned the entire framework of U.S. foreign policy that Jeane Kirkpatrick had so eloquently outlined twenty-two years earlier. Although there was a well-developed bureaucracy dedicated to developing, advancing, and coordinating U.S. efforts to promote human rights and democracy, these matters were of generally little consequence when decisions were made in Washington concerning the Middle East up until September 10, 2001.

A day later, what went on inside Arab countries—the human rights violations, limited economic opportunity, availability of extremists ideologies, and the overall predatory nature of Middle Eastern governments—was suddenly supremely important to safeguarding the United States, its interests, and the American people. In order to “drain the swamp” of would-be terrorists, the administration of George W. Bush embarked on an effort to promote democratic change in the Arab world. The architects of the policy theorized that the combination of political alienation, economic dislocation, and availability of extremist ideology in the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East—most notably Egypt, but also Saudi Arabia—were more likely to produce terrorists. If disaffected young men could process their grievances through democratic institutions, fewer would want to bomb American embassies, attack U.S. warships, and fly civilian airliners into buildings in Manhattan and Washington.

The prescription for America’s terrorism problem—promoting democracy—was deeply appealing and achieved a near foreign policy consensus. It is not hard to see why. The policy promised to mitigate, if not entirely resolve, what suddenly seemed to be the

singular national security threat to the United States. Once more, it promised a foreign policy consistent with American values. This would do much to alleviate—if not again resolve—the problem of anti-Americanism in the region. Besides Washington’s unstinting support for Israel, the perceived gap between the principles, practices, and norms by which Americans like to believe they live at home and the conduct of the United States in the Middle East caused considerable anger among average Egyptians and other Arabs. Egyptians would often ask, “Why has the United States historically supported freedom and democracy in Latin America and Eastern Europe but not the Middle East?” The claim about Latin America is certainly debatable, but the broader issue of Arab perceptions about the United States and its support for nondemocratic leaders in the region was both analytically important and has the virtue of being true.

The hasty enthusiasm with which official—and unofficial—Washington embraced democracy promotion could not make up for some of the policy’s significant analytical and practical drawbacks, however. There seemed to be a somewhat sunny emphasis on one potential endpoint of transitions—liberal democracy—at the expense of other potential outcomes including illiberal democracy or a “narrowed dictatorship.” Never mind that instability—both internal and external—is often associated with countries undergoing transitions. To be fair, there was a general awareness of this risk, but it was often deemed acceptable given the alternative. The report of the Council on Foreign Relations’ Independent Task Force on reform in the Arab world was typical in this regard: “While transitions to democracy can lead to instability in the short term, the Task Force finds that a policy geared toward maintaining the authoritarian status quo poses greater risks to U.S. interests and foreign policy goals.”

Policy makers and advocates of democracy promotion may have been correct in their assumption that fewer people would be willing to take up arms against their states—and the United States—in more open, transparent, and accountable political systems. Still, Sayyid Qutb’s intellectual framework for transnational jihad was revolutionary and uncompromising, distinguishing only between a very specific conception of Islamic society and the rest. To the extent that there will always be people attracted to this worldview, the United States and its allies will be targets of *al Qaeda*, its affiliates, and its imitators. There is no policy prescription for this other than good police work, intelligence gathering, and superior firepower.

The other problem for the United States was the uncharted territory of encouraging political change in friendly Arab countries. The critique among democracy advocates in the Arab world that the United States promoted freedom everywhere but the Middle East was, as noted, powerful and largely correct. Yet the implication of some anti-Arab bias in this perceived anomaly was on one level understandable given long standing American policy in the Middle East, but it was also wrong. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and

Morocco are all Arab countries, but that is not the salient characteristic common to all of them. Rather, they are American allies who happen to be Arab. Over the course of six decades, Washington had no interest in promoting democracy in the Arab world because its policy of relying on friendly authoritarians to achieve its objectives in the Middle East seemed to work quite well. Once the United States finally decided that freedom in the Middle East mattered after the September 11 attacks and the articulation of the “Freedom Agenda,” policymakers had very little idea how to advance reform in large part because there was no policy memo, playbook, or inkling how to do this within friendly countries.

In the Middle East and Egypt, in particular, Washington needed to answer two critical questions about democratic change in the Middle East. First, how does it encourage Arab leaders to undertake reform? Second, how does the United States protect its strategic interests in the short and medium terms when transitions tend to be fraught? Neither the Bush nor the Obama administrations answered either question effectively, though the political upheaval in the Middle East in early 2011 made the first query moot as far as Egypt was concerned. Before the end of President Mubarak’s reign, analysts and observers suggested pressuring him to change by leveraging economic and military assistance in a manner that would force the Egyptian leader to undertake meaningful political change in order to secure American largesse. This, they argued, posed relatively little risk to U.S. interests because anything Washington asked of Mubarak was in his interest anyway. Actual policymakers did not seem totally convinced of this argument and when it came to the Egyptian uprising, they seemed hamstrung between the uncertainties of political change and American interests. At least during the early stages of the mass demonstrations against Mubarak, the Obama administration walked a very fine line between a nondemocratic ally who had contributed much to U.S. regional interests and popular demands for a democratic transition. Indeed, Washington seemed to position itself in a way that had the Egyptian president managed to hang on, the damage to U.S.-Egypt relations would not have been as great had the White House totally broken from the dictator.

‘A Lot of Skepticism’

The most profound shortcoming of democracy promotion policy was, however, resistance from the Arabs themselves. This was to be expected of Egyptian leaders who rejected the American intrusion in Egypt’s internal affairs. Egyptian nationalism can often be prickly, but more importantly, Cairo did not believe that it should answer to anyone, even those who were providing it with generous aid.

Yet this view was not confined to the Egyptian officialdom. Even those intellectuals, activists, and ordinary Egyptians who wanted to live in a democracy were uneasy about the post-9/11 discussion in Washington about democracy in Egypt and the Middle East. Here there were three interrelated concerns: First, just as with the Egyptian leadership,

there is a deeply ingrained sense of nationalism that breeds contempt of foreigners bearing advice about the way Egyptians should live. Second, the American policy was widely believed to be an effort to “impose” democracy on Egypt. This became a particularly potent issue after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which, by default, became an actual exercise in imposing democracy on an Arab country. Finally, as Washington was shifting toward a policy emphasizing democratic change, Egyptian intellectuals, students, and other observers argued that the United States sought democratic change out of its “own interests.” This was true. Whereas authoritarian stability had been regarded previously as the best way to secure the free flow of oil and Israel’s security and maintain American predominance, Bush administration officials now calculated that in fact democratic states in the Arab world would best help Washington achieve these goals. In 2002, an Egyptian political scientist named Hassan Nafa’a appeared on a panel at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy’s annual Soref Symposium. During the event Nafa’a, who would later go on to be one of the spokesmen for Mohammed ElBaradei’s reformist National Association for Change, articulated widely held suspicions of American democracy promotion in Egypt:

Everyone would like to see democratic regimes rule, not only in Arab and Muslim countries, but everywhere. You will nevertheless find a lot of skepticism, because once you have democratic ideals that conflict with other objectives of American foreign policy—such as oil supply or the security of Israel—the United States sacrifices the former, being much more keen to achieve the latter. Is there a commitment to restructure the agenda of U.S. foreign policy objectives? I am not so sure.

Nafa’a is hardly representative of Egypt’s broad community of democracy activists, but the sentiments he expressed touch precisely on why the United States was widely regarded to be an illegitimate messenger of change.

Even as the Egyptian government—like many other states in the region—was deflecting Washington’s pressure for change, the Bush administration was operationalizing what until December 12, 2002, had been a largely rhetorical exercise. On that day, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell announced the establishment of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) with an initial funding of \$29 million. This new layer of bureaucracy within the Near Eastern Affairs Bureau of the State Department was intended to take the lead in implementing the administration’s Freedom Agenda. MEPI would fund programs in four critical areas—called pillars—that were deemed important to building liberal democracies in the Arab world: political reform, economic reform, educational reform, and women’s empowerment. In practice, MEPI’s writ included encouraging trade, mobilizing foreign direct investment, promoting the

rule of law, strengthening civil society, helping improve access to quality education, and addressing specific challenges that women face in the Arab world. Some of this work had begun during the 1990s under the auspices of AID [U.S. Agency for International Development], but the exigencies of U.S. foreign policy post-September 11 gave many of these programs new emphasis. While AID had focused on creating constituencies within Arab governments for change, the rationale for MEPI was to work with independent and indigenous NGOs and civil society groups, as well as governments.

Even before the establishment of MEPI, the People's Assembly passed the Law of Associations (Law 84 of 2002, also known as the NGO Law) that restricted the ability of Egyptian civil society organizations to raise money and made it more difficult for them to operate. Central to the law was a requirement that all NGOs—between 16,000 and 19,000 organizations—register with the Ministry of Social Affairs, which gave the government the opportunity to reject applications from a variety of long-standing groups dedicated to human rights, workers' rights, housing rights, and combating torture. The NGOs were also prohibited from engaging in political activity, though there was immediate concern among civil society organizers that the excessively broad view of "politics" among Egyptian functionaries and ministers would place their organizations in jeopardy. While NGOs were permitted to accept donations, they were prohibited from receiving money from abroad without exception. Also, if the organization received funding of twenty thousand Egyptian pounds or more from a single source, the NGO's board was required to submit the details of the donation and supporting documentation to a registered auditor. Violation of these provisions would result in fines equal to the amount of the gift or jail time.

Congress sought to give Egyptian organizations a way out of these restrictions when, eighteen months later, it included a provision—known as the Brownback amendment (for then-Senator Sam Brownback, a Republican from Kansas)—in Public Law 108-447 that stated, "With respect to the provision of assistance for Egypt for democracy and governance activities, the organizations implementing such assistance and the specific nature of that assistance shall not be subject to the prior approval by the Government of Egypt." Before leaving Cairo to become the assistant secretary of state for Near East Affairs, U.S. Ambassador David Welch, tested the Brownback amendment when he announced at a press conference that the United States was providing \$1 million to two NGOs and four advocacy groups registered as companies without the prior approval of the Egyptian government, though Welch made it clear that Cairo had been made aware of the grants.

Welch's announcement produced a fierce reaction from members of the People's Assembly. Almost immediately, Abu El Ezz el Harriri from the Tagammu Party demanded that the prime minister investigate what he termed "a blatant breach of

diplomatic norms that could open the door wide for more American meddling in Egyptian affairs.” Mohammed Abdel Alim, a Wafdist, assailed the government for permitting the United States to fund Egyptian advocacy organizations. Members of the ruling National Democratic Party, in an effort not to be caught on the wrong side of what was clearly a sensitive issue, sided with the opposition and demanded that the restrictions on foreign funding for NGOs be extended to companies as well. In the end, the Egyptian efforts to undermine the Brownback amendment mattered little, as Washington continued to fund civil society groups who sought U.S. support regardless of Cairo’s objections.

Indeed, with the establishment of a bureaucracy dedicated to encouraging democratic change in the Middle East, the Bush administration was signaling that political reform in the Arab world was going to be a lasting feature of American foreign policy. Indeed, the administration hammered away at the themes it discovered after 9/11, linking terrorism to authoritarianism, the inherent instability of nondemocratic rule, and the universal values of freedom and democracy. Almost a year after the establishment of MEPI, President Bush made the short trip across Lafayette Park opposite the White House on Pennsylvania Avenue to the colonnaded headquarters of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. The reason for his visit was a speech marking the twentieth anniversary of the federally funded National Endowment for Democracy, which is “dedicated to the growth and strengthening of democratic institutions around the world.” The president’s remarks were notable in one important respect. Besides using the clunky phrase “forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East” for the first time to describe his administration’s policy, Bush explained to his audience why a push for democratic change had become a central focus of his approach to the Arab world:

Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe—because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export. And with the spread of weapons that can bring catastrophic harm to our country and to our friends, it would be reckless to accept the status quo.

The president praised countries like Bahrain, Qatar, and Morocco for rather modest steps toward more open politics, and even lauded Saudi Arabia for its plan to hold its first-ever municipal elections, but there were no such plaudits for Egypt. Bush neither complimented nor criticized the Egyptians. Rather, citing Cairo’s leadership in peace, he exhorted Egypt to “show the way toward democracy in the Middle East.”

The Egyptian response to President Bush was to reject his reasoning and deflect his challenge. A week after the speech, the editor in chief of the government-affiliated daily *al Abram*, Ibrahim Nafie, argued that the preconditions for democratic change were “obviated, directly or indirectly, by U.S. policy in the region.” Nafie was, of course, referring to Washington’s support for Israel and the American invasion of Iraq. Yet Nafie went further, harkening back to the Western penetration of Egypt and the region more generally: “By perpetuating its occupation of Iraq, the Bush administration forces us to conclude that it has launched a colonial project aimed at securing control over this region’s vital resources, and that this project is cloaked in the old time garb of ‘the white man’s burden’ to civilize non-white people.” Makram Mohammed Ahmad, editor of the state-owned weekly *al Musawwar*, expanded on Nafie’s central theme declaring that the United States:

Insists on imposing its own cultural patterns on everybody without understanding the culture of others; interferes in every little detail of internal affairs; ignores the limits of religion and social customs in its definition of family and defense of homosexuals and people who violate the traditions of their society; imposes itself as a partner in religious and educational issues which are considered exclusive to national work; and imagines that what is good for the United States can be good for others.

Ahmad ended his column implying that Washington’s credibility problem was related to its “blind bias toward Israel.” In *Akhbar al Youm*, columnist Galal Arif summed up the position of the state-owned press in a column a little more than a week after President Bush’s speech: “The Arabs know that U.S. policies have for the past sixty years been a real enemy for all their hopes in establishing justice and democracy. But they also know that there is no place for any U.S. talk about democracy while American aircraft are killing Palestinian children.”

Still, there was a sense in Egypt that Washington, which for so long had supported Egyptian authoritarianism with military, diplomatic and financial support, was playing a critical role by supplying political cover for the opposition. Although some of Cairo’s reformers were profoundly opposed to U.S. policy in Iraq and Palestine, they nevertheless supported—some more grudgingly than others—the Bush administration’s pressure for political change. Hisham Kassem, chairman of the board of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights and founding editor of *al Masry al Youm*, argued that U.S. policy was decisive in cracking open the door of Egyptian political reform. While not entirely unexpected of Kassem—a liberal who welcomed American democracy promotion—even Abdel Halim Qandil, at the time a spokesman for Kifaya! and editor of

the Nasserist *al Arabi* that was fiercely critical of the United States, acknowledged that Washington's outspoken support for democracy was providing him and his movement a certain amount of protection from the Egyptian state. For its part, the Muslim Brotherhood was generally quiet on these issues, but it was taking advantage of the relatively more liberal political environment to press its agenda.

Bush may have been a reviled figure among many Egyptians, but his administration helped them publicly air questions about the sources of power and legitimacy of the regime. This was an astounding turn of events. Previously Washington had been a critical factor in Egyptian politics as various opposition groups sought to leverage the U.S.-Egypt strategic relationship to highlight the regime's vulnerability on issues like nationalism and sovereignty. Now the United States was a source of vulnerability for the regime in an entirely different way. In Washington's efforts to attack the "root causes" of terrorism, it injected itself directly into Egyptian debates over the long unsettled questions: What is Egypt? How is it organized? What is its political trajectory and what does it stand for?

Within months, however, the United States and the Egyptian government would revert to form. The Egyptian leadership would regain its footing through the help of both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Palestinian group Hamas. The Brotherhood's electoral success in Egypt in November–December 2005 and, in particular, Hamas' outright victory in the Palestinian legislative elections in January 2006 spooked Washington. Absent an answer to the question, "How do you protect U.S. interests in the short and medium term?" the soaring rhetoric about democracy, freedom, and change that had become a hallmark of the administration was greatly scaled back and became largely perfunctory, though the work of MEPI and AID continued. This was also a time when the situation in Iraq was deteriorating, and Iran used the opportunity to flex its muscles there. Under these circumstances, there was a strong pull in Washington for retrenchment and a focus on core American interests. The change in U.S. policy only confirmed what Hassan Nafa'a and others had suspected four years earlier—positive rhetoric aside, ultimately Washington would not alter its long-standing approach to the Middle East. Washington's pull back from the Freedom Agenda only substantiated what the Brotherhood's Supreme Guide Maamoun al Hudaybi warned a little more than a month after President Bush's National Endowment for Democracy speech—that the United States was not to be trusted because "[it] does not seek to realize the interests of the Arab world. Otherwise it would have stopped its support for Israel and withdrawn its armies from Iraq." The fact that Hamas' electoral victory appeared to be the reason for the Bush administration's sudden uncertainty about democracy in the Middle East spoke volumes to Egyptian and Arab commentators and activists. Indeed, after spending the better part of the previous four years emphasizing the need for political change, by early 2006 the United States

looked more and more like the peddler of pernicious double standards Egyptian and Arab skeptics had long suspected.

Flawed Assumptions?

Since the 1960s, Egypt's leaders have failed to develop a coherent ideological vision that makes sense to most people. As a result, the Egyptian elite have had to rely on bribery and coercion to ensure social cohesion. Even so, the amount of resources available to Egyptian leaders in contrast to their Saudi counterparts, is limited. As a result, President Mubarak only had enough largesse to buy off that constituency for autocracy—big business, the military, security service, regime intellectuals, and the bureaucracy. The rest of society was controlled almost exclusively through violence or the threat of it. This is expensive and risky, revealing the profound weakness of the Egyptian state.

In the process of threatening or actually using force against their own population, the Egyptian leadership only added to an increasingly angry, polarized, radicalized, and potentially unstable political arena. Yet Washington based its approach to the Middle East in large part on a stable Egypt, despite all of the country's pressing problems. This conclusion was based on two observations. First, the Egyptians demonstrated a capacity to muddle through significant challenges—defeat in war, economic stagnation, assassination, and terrorism—in the past. Second, the regime's primary constituents never withdrew their support from the leadership. Both these observations are true, but they did not provide insight into the prospects for Egypt's future stability.

On the eve of the Egyptian revolution, Washington was stuck, locked into a relationship that had certain strategic purposes in the past, but with a country whose regional influence seemed to be waning and not as stable as widely believed. The policy debate over Egypt took for granted that President Mubarak would die in office and once the old man took his last sail up the Nile another regime figure would take his place. As a result, policymakers and analysts tended to think of Egypt policy in terms of two options: authoritarian stability or democracy promotion.

For some of those who regarded the Bush administration's efforts to foster democratic change a mistake, a renewed commitment to President Mubarak, the regime he led, and ultimately to his successor would fortify the Egyptian leadership and renew its flagging international and regional standing. With enhanced American support, Cairo would enjoy new regional prestige, making Egypt a more effective partner than in the immediate past. There were several problems with this approach, however. First, it did nothing to alter the vision-patronage-coercion balance that was at the heart of Egypt's weakness; in fact, a policy of authoritarian stability would have only endorsed Cairo's reliance on coercion. Second, it did not resolve a central yet unintended problem in the U.S.-Egypt relationship: Washington had become a critical albeit largely negative factor in Egypt's domestic

political struggles. The opposition used the strategic ties between the two countries—or what they have long suspected about these relations, much of which the November 2010 WikiLeaks’ revelations confirmed—as a political cudgel against President Mubarak and the regime, more generally. The government deflected this criticism by striking its own anti-American posture by using force against its domestic opponents. Finally, the argument posited that it was possible to turn back the clock in both Egypt and the United States. Yet, too much had happened over the course of the 2000s. In Egypt, activists were challenging the authority of the state in new and bolder ways. Political reform had become a critical part of Egypt’s national debate. In Washington, although critics charged that Washington had essentially abandoned the push for democracy as of 2006, when the Bush administration toned down its Freedom Agenda rhetoric, the American foreign policy bureaucracy continued to encourage democratic change in the Middle East.

The second option that wonks and officials debated was a full return to the Freedom Agenda. To advocates of this approach, democratic leaders in Egypt would have to rely less on coercion because they would enjoy the consent of the governed. Yet a return to the democracy-focused approach of 2003–2005 presented a range of problems for Washington. As noted in detail earlier, Egypt’s leadership was manifestly opposed to an American role in promoting political change. In the run-up to Egypt’s 2010 People’s Assembly elections, which the *Economist* magazine described as “garishly fraudulent,” an unnamed senior Egyptian government official called American democracy promoters “deluded.” Although it turns out that this was a more apt description of Egyptian officialdom on the eve of the January 25 uprising, this surprising undiplomatic remark was accompanied by a slew of commentaries in the state-controlled press hurling invective at the United States for its alleged interference in Egypt’s internal affairs. This was a fight that the Egyptians seemed determined to make sure that Washington lost. With the exception of MEPI grantees, it was also not entirely clear how much Egyptians wanted Washington’s help in this area given their perception of foreigners on ostensibly civilizing missions. The recent record of U.S.-Middle East policy is thus hardly an asset for selling American goodwill to skeptical Egyptians. Operation Iraqi Freedom, Washington’s support for Israel in its struggle with the Palestinians, and the notion that Washington sought to “impose democracy” on Egypt remain visceral topics in many quarters.

At the same time, the Bush administration’s approach to Egypt and the Arab world writ large held enormous appeal. The “forward strategy of freedom” seemed like an antidote to a great global threat emerging from the Middle East, and it had the great benefit of being entirely consistent with American values—something often unapologetically missing from the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. Yet, too often observers overlook the fact that political change is not linear and is entirely contingent. What may start out as a seeming transition to democracy could end up as the consolidation of a liberal democracy or

an illiberal democracy or a dictatorship. Never mind that states moving from one type of political system tend to be more unstable and warlike than others. The question was whether these potential costs outweighed the perceived benefits of a democracy promotion strategy. Few scholars have addressed these issues in a rigorous way, but in January and February 2011 it became largely moot. Until that time, American officials and other outside observers assumed that democratic change in Egypt was a generational project. During that time, American aid and values could, if employed judiciously, encourage a democratic evolution of Egypt's political system. This would have the twin benefit of ensuring the development of democratic institutions and, importantly, protecting American interests. It turned out, however, that after thirty years under Hosni Mubarak, Egyptians could not wait.

The U.S.-Egypt Breakup?

In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of Hosni Mubarak's rule, a game particular to Washington, DC broke out. It began with, "How did the Obama administration do?" and would end with "Can the Bush administration take any credit for the democratic wave sweeping the Middle East?" The honest answers to these questions are "It does not matter," and "Unlikely." To be sure, the Obama team was somewhat slow to recognize what exactly was happening in Egypt. The political dynamics on the ground were way beyond the administration's declarations on January 25 that it was time for reform. Yet American foreign policy officials can be forgiven for the State Department's tin-eared declarations about Egyptian stability. Senior U.S. officials and their staff lived in the same world where academics and policy analysts alike regarded Egypt's political system as among the most stable in the Arab world. In retrospect, President Obama could have staked out any position, and events in Egypt were likely to unfold as they did no matter what he said once the revolutionary bandwagon took off. For their part, members of the Bush administration freely admit that they failed to impress upon Hosni Mubarak the importance of reform. He was resistant at every turn, claiming that he knew Egypt and how to rule it better than they. Also, the extraordinary events of January–February 2011 had nothing whatsoever to do with the U.S. invasion of Iraq almost eight years earlier. Iraq was regarded as the quintessential example of American hubris and few, if any, Egyptians saw it as an example for their country. Rather, it was the Tunisians taking matters into their own hands and toppling their dictator that provided inspiration for Egyptians.

This all suggests that Washington has far less ability to shape events in Egypt than commonly believed. That may have been a drawback for policymakers in the mid-2000s who were trying to pressure Mubarak to embark upon reform, but it is actually a good thing in post-revolutionary Egypt. Within hours of Mubarak's departure for Sharm el

Sheikh, Washington was abuzz with a renewed interest in democracy promotion. Now, according to some, was the time to pour more resources into this area. This policy prescription betrayed not only a fundamental misunderstanding of what had transpired in the previous two weeks, but also a blatant disregard for almost a century and a half of Egyptian history. The last thing that Egyptians—who had entirely on their own dislodged their dictator, renewing a sense of national pride and spirit—wanted was a foreign power offering expertise and advice about how to manage their transition.

Moreover, although the United States was not responsible for the inequity of Mubarak's rule, it did enable it and benefit from it. Mubarak was Washington's man in Cairo: he kept the Suez Canal open, repressed the Islamists, and maintained peace with Israel. In return, the United States provided much for Egypt, contributing billions in economic assistance over the years to build up the country's infrastructure, agricultural technology, and public health programs. Yet U.S. assistance, while certainly contributing to Egypt's development also served to undermine the nationalist legitimacy of the regime. After all, how could Mubarak boast of Egyptian pride and ability when USAID employees and contractors were nestled in many government ministries?

At the same time, Egyptians came to see that their country's foreign policy was being warped for the sake of U.S. largesse. The original sin was Sadat's separate peace with Israel, which Mubarak inherited and scrupulously upheld. From the perspective of many Egyptians, this arrangement hopelessly constrained Cairo's power while it freed Israel and the United States to pursue their regional interests unencumbered. For the United States, Mubarak was pivotal in creating a regional order that made it easier and less expensive for Washington to pursue its interests, from the free flow of oil to the protection of Israel and the prevention of any one country in the region from becoming too dominant. The benefits to Mubarak were clear: approximately \$70 billion in economic and military aid over thirty years and the ostensible prestige of being a partner of the world's superpower.

For Egypt, the particular policy ramifications of this deal have been plentiful, including Egypt's deployment of thirty-five thousand troops to Saudi Arabia in the Gulf War of 1991, its quiet support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, its implicit alliance with Israel during the war in Lebanon in 2006, and its complicity with Israel in the blockade of Gaza. Mubarak believed that these policies served Egypt's interests—at least how he defined them—but they ran directly against the grain of Egyptian public opinion. Mubarak thus faced two irreconcilable positions: he could either be Washington's man or a man of the people—but not both. He chose the former and filled in the resulting legitimacy gap with manipulation and force.

It is no surprise, then, that the relationship between Egypt and the United States ran like a live wire through the popular opposition to Mubarak's rule. Protesters in Cairo declared in March 2003, just as U.S. forces were pouring into Iraq, that only a democratic

Egypt would be able to resist Israeli and U.S. policies in the Middle East. More recently, opponents of Mubarak expressed a similar sentiment, calling Mubarak's presidency the "Camp David regime."

No Egyptian leader will make Mubarak's mistake again, which does not portend well for Washington's position in the Middle East. The United States should greatly lower its expectations of what is possible in the post-Mubarak era and come to terms with the end of the strategic relationship. Where, then, does this leave Washington? The best the United States can do to salvage its position in Egypt is for the Obama administration to emphasize democracy, tolerance, pluralism, accountability, and nonviolence—and then take a hands-off approach as Egyptians build a new political system on their own terms. Washington has become such a negative factor in Egyptian politics that it risks doing more harm than good if U.S. officials give in to the temptation to do much more than emphasize "first principles" on a peaceful, orderly, and transparent political change. Implicit demands that call into question the continuation of the U.S. assistance package or even suggestions on how Egyptians should proceed after the Mubarak era will be met with tremendous resistance from those seeking to lead, if only because Egypt's politicians will need to demonstrate their nationalist credibility.

What sort of political future will emerge in Egypt is hard to predict. At the very least, however, Egypt does have a parliamentary history. The country's 1923 constitution established a parliament that functioned on and off to varying degrees until the Free Officers' revolution in 1952. That era was destabilized by the British presence in Egypt, which ultimately ushered in Nasser and his comrades, who constructed the regime against which Egyptians ultimately rebelled. Washington does not occupy Egypt, but it risks playing a malevolent role in the transition if it tries to interfere. This is not only because of the mistrust many Egyptians have for the United States, but also because the trajectory of Egyptian politics is unknowable and is likely to stay that way for some time. Revolutions rarely end the way their protagonists and participants desire when they are on the barricades.

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